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Number ——— Twenty-Three.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

BY

DANIEL WISE, D.D.

NEW YORK:
PHILLIPS & HUNT.
CINCINNATI:
CRANSTON & STOWE.
1884.

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J. H. Vincent.

New York, Jan., 1888.

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE was born at Stratford-on-Avon, Warwickshire, England, in April, 1564. The precise day of his birth is unknown, but since the baptismal register of the church in Stratford shows April 26 to have been the date of his baptism, it is probable that his birthday was only a few days earlier, it being customary in those old times to baptize infants as early after birth as was practicable.

Of Shakespeare's ancestors very little is certainly known. The name itself indicates their military profession. It is supposed to be derived from the fact that ancient spearmen brandished the lance before hurling it on the enemy. Hence old Ben Jonson wrote:

> "Look how the father's face
> Lives in his issue; even so, the race
> Of Shakespeare's mind and manners brightly shines
> In his well torn and true-filed lines;
> In each of which he seems to *shake a lance*,
> As brandished at the eyes of Ignorance."

Whether this conjecture concerning the founders of his family be well-founded or fanciful is uncertain; but of his father it is certain he was no soldier. The scant annals and traditions of Stratford afford such glimpses of his social position and fortune as to make it certain that he was a respectable citizen, who, during the boyhood of his illustrious son, possessed a moderate estate and was highly esteemed by his fellow townsmen, albeit his education had been so neglected that he could not write his own name. His business was that of a glover, to which he seems to have joined the cultivation of his lands. In official circles he figured as

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constable, juror, alderman, bailiff, and magistrate. By marriage he was allied to a family socially superior to his own. His wife, Mary Arden, was the youngest of seven daughters, and her marriage portion and her subsequent inheritance at her father's death contributed considerably to the solid comfort of the home in which our poet spent his boyhood.

William was the third of eight children born to John and Mary Shakespeare. Nothing is known of his child life. De Quincy says: "There can be little doubt that William Shakespeare, from his birth up to his tenth or perhaps his eleventh year, lived in careless plenty, and saw nothing in his father's house but that style of liberal housekeeping which has ever distinguished the upper yeomanry and the rural gentry of England." Possibly his father's expenditures were on a scale too liberal for his income, inasmuch as his affairs became inextricably embarrassed in 1575. His subsequent long-continued difficulties with his creditors, of which the sensitive and observant William must have been painfully aware, probably furnished more or less of the materials out of which, in after years, the poet drew inspiration when writing his Timon of Athens. One can scarcely doubt that his father's harsh creditors were in his mind when he composed these lines:

> "His familiars to his buried fortunes
> Slink all away; left their false vows with him,
> Like empty purses picked: and his poor self,
> A dedicated beggar to the air,
> With his disease of all-shunned poverty,
> Walked, like contempt, alone."

There was a free grammar school in Stratford. Shakespeare's parents, notwithstanding their own illiteracy, must have felt desirous of giving their hopeful boy an advantage the lack of which in their own lives must have been more or less a source of mortification, at least on occasions. Hence,

in the absence of positive proof, it is inferred that they sent him to this school. This inference is supported by the evidence furnished in his works that his early education had not been wholly neglected, that he had acquired at least a smattering of the classics. Nevertheless, there is no positive proof that he was one of its pupils; nor, if he was, how long he enjoyed its instruction.

Tradition said that "in his younger years he had been a school-master in the country." Others thinks that possibly he may have acted as an usher in the grammar school for a time. Another tradition places him in a law office, the financial needs of his father making it desirable, if not necessary, that he should contribute somewhat to the family exchequer. This latter supposition finds support in his use of law terms and allusions to an extent quite unusual in the dramatic literature of his age. But these are mere conjectures resting on nothing more solid than the "airy fabric of a vision."

But when our poet reached his nineteenth year we see him (too distinctly, for his own happiness) in the act of contracting an ill-advised marriage with a yeoman's daughter, named Anne Hathaway. How this marriage came about cannot now be known. That it was folly for an impecunious boy, not nineteen years old, to marry a woman of twenty-six none will dispute. But who was to blame? Both, doubtless; but chiefly this mature woman. Anne was assuredly old enough to perceive its unwisdom. The probability is that she, if not the actual suitor, was yet the lad's beguiler. Shakespeare was a handsome, well-formed man. His family and social connections were superior to hers. Perhaps, as De Quincy shrewdly suggests, her womanly intuition divined his prospective greatness. Moreover, being only a yeoman's daughter without a fortune of any moment in the marriage market, and having reached an age at which her chances of marriage were becoming fewer every year,

she probably played off her charms, whatever they were, upon the lad's susceptible and inexperienced nature. But, be this as it may, the circumstances which surrounded this ill-assorted marriage were discreditable to both parties. And, as might be expected, it resulted in unhappiness to both, though it probably led the young husband into the career which developed his great poetical and dramatic genius. Twenty years afterward, Shakespeare revealed the wound that even then rankled in his breast in the following lines, which he put into the mouth of the Duke Orsino, when advising his youthful page with respect to marriage:

> "*Let still the woman take*
> *An elder than herself;* so wears she to him,
> So sways she level in her husband's heart.
> For, boy, however we do praise ourselves,
> Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,
> More longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn,
> Than women's are.
> * * * * * * * *
> Then let thy love *be younger than thyself,*
> Or thy affection cannot hold the bent:
> For women are as roses; whose fair flower,
> Being once displayed, doth fall that very hour."

Shakespeare was married almost the first of December, 1582. The following May a daughter, Susanna, was born to him. His father's reduced circumstances not permitting him to give the imprudent pair a home, must have made the boy husband more or less dependent on his wife's father. What he did toward the support of his wife is unknown; probably very little. It is also probable that Mistress Anne, conscious that her gentle young husband, sobered by his early trials into reflective moods, was ceasing even to respect her because of her forwardness in bringing about their marriage, began to retaliate his growing coolness by reproaching him for his dependence on her father. His

proverbial gentleness forbids the supposition that the discord was open and violent. It is, however, scarcely to be doubted that their lives were inharmonious and unsatisfactory. And when, in 1585, twins were born to them, the increasing cost of maintenance for his family must have impressed the poet with the obvious fact that Stratford was not likely to furnish him the means of adding to his slender resources. It is natural, therefore, to suppose that the pressure of his discouraging circumstances led him to turn his attention toward London. By going thither he would certainly escape the annoyances of his marital life, and might possibly discover a path leading to fortune, if not to fame.

To account for Shakespeare's departure from Stratford and subsequent long residence in London, the early biographers of the poet invented a romantic story of his arrest and judicial whipping for stealing deer from the park of Sir Thomas Lucy. But later writers, after much sifting of the few ascertainable facts in the case, either pronounce the story unproven or discredit it entirely, as De Quincy does when, in his usual forcible manner, he says, "This tale is fabulous and rotten to the core." It is far more reasonable to accept the theory that Shakespeare, seeing no opening in Stratford for the play of his great talents, of which he must have been more or less conscious, acted on the advice of certain London play-actors who were natives of Stratford, and who often acted in that town when on their provincial tours. His father, being an alderman, would necessarily become acquainted with those men through their applications to the aldermanic board for licenses. It is also very probable that the elder Shakespeare, being given to jovial hospitality, entertained some of those leading actors at his table, and that William's dramatic and poetic tastes were awakened by listening to their conversations and witnessing their performances.

But whatever his motives were, it is certain that Shakes-

peare when little more than twenty-two years of age went to London, leaving his wife and children in Stratford, where she remained to the end of her life. The incidents connected with his introduction to the metropolis, could they be ascertained, would no doubt be interesting and illustrative of the influences which aided the development of his genius. But thick darkness covers this part of his career. It is true that a myth once found currency which stated that, on reaching London, he earned a living for some time by holding the horses of persons who rode to the theater. Another legend made him a "call-boy or deputy prompter, whose business it was to summon each performer according to his order of coming upon the stage."

Concerning these legends it may be said first, that they contradict each other, since if he held horses outside the theater he could not act as call-boy on the inside. Against his holding horses lies the fact that gentlemen were not in the habit of riding to the theater on horseback, and that, if such had been their practice, they would not have left their steeds in the streets exposed to the weather during the hours required for the performance of a play. Against the supposition that our poet was only a call-boy at his first entrance upon a theatrical life, lies the fact that his name appears in 1589, less than three years after his arrival, "as a shareholder in the important property of a principal London theater." This latter unquestionable fact makes both legends incredible, and renders it almost certain that the actors who had known the elder Shakespeare in Stratford had discerned the signs of genius in the son, had invited him to London, and had given him immediate employment in their theater, either as an actor or as their assistant in altering and adapting old plays to the demands of their stage. This view is further strengthened by the not improbable supposition that, before going to London, Shakespeare had written a series of sonnets which, though of very question-

able morality, contained many passages of rare poetic strength and beauty. These sonnets which, when published, he called, in their dedication to Lord Southampton, "the first heir of his invention," were circulated in manuscript among Shakespeare's friends for several years. They were more than sufficient to convince such sharp-sighted play-actors as Betterton and Burbage, that while their young author's handsome face and fine figure fitted him to fill the part of mimic kings and potentates on the stage, his inventive, penetrative, observant mind also gave promise of dramatic productions that might lend a dignity and literary attractiveness to the theater, of which it then stood, as it always has done, in very sore need.

Of Shakespeare's manner of life in London during the twenty-five years of his residence there very little is positively known. At first he appears to have been employed both as an actor and in adapting foreign and old English plays to the demands of the London theatrical audiences of that day. His success in these departments is proved by his so soon becoming part proprietor of the theater. Two years later he produced his first original play, "The Two Gentlemen of Verona." From this time, 1591, his creative genius was almost incessantly productive until 1611, when he wrote his last play, "The Tempest." During these twenty years of acting and play-writing—he probably did not *act* in the latter part of this period—he produced thirty-seven plays, an average of nearly one for every six months. When the high intellectual merits of these plays are considered, with the variety and marked individuality of their numerous characters, their profound observations on human life, and their acute analyses of the motives which lie at the roots of men's actions, this fertility of Shakespeare's genius is truly astonishing. It justifies Coleridge in calling him "our myriad-minded Shakespeare," and De Quincy in pronouncing him "the glory of the human intellect."

Neither play-actors nor their intimate friends have ever, as a class, been noted for the moral purity of their lives. Men whose aim in life is the mere amusement of the idle and the gay are not apt to form very lofty ideals for the guidance of their own lives. Hence, in too many, perhaps a majority of cases, play-actors have been like Marlowe, an actor of Shakespeare's day, of whom it was said in a ballad on his death:

> "He was a fellow to all those
> Who did God's laws reject,
> Consorting with the Christian's foes
> And men of ill aspect."

No doubt many, if not most, of our poet's theatrical associates more or less resembled Marlowe. Taking his "Sugared Sonnets" and the grossness found in his comedies as the basis of judgment, one cannot well help thinking that Shakespeare's habits of life were not wholly unlike those of his fellow actors. That he was not like the worst of them is, however, made tolerably certain by the amazing productiveness of his pen, and by his steadily increasing financial prosperity. What his intellectual industry achieved we have already seen, and his critics all admit that his latest work was his best. His thrift in pecuniary matters is apparent in that some three years after his arrival in London as an impecunious rustic, he became, as stated above, the owner of a share in the Blackfriars' Theater. Seven years later he had largely increased his interest in that establishment. In 1603 he was a principal proprietor in the Globe Theater, and was rich enough to purchase the best house, with one hundred and seven adjacent acres, in his native town. He also secured a renewed grant of arms from the Herald's College for his father, whose fortunes and social position he restored by liberal provisions for the comfort of his declining years. In 1611, twenty-five years after his advent into

London, he was able to bid adieu to the scenes of his labors and triumph, and to return to Stratford with an income equivalent in modern money to not less than seven thousand five hundred dollars per annum—the first man of letters who made a fortune by literature. From these successes it is a fair inference that, though the vices of his associates may have charmed him on occasions into practices contrary to Christian morality, yet they never loaded him with their chains, never made him their slave. Vice levies such exhausting taxes on time, brain, and purse that, if Shakespeare had been its bond-slave, his wonderful achievements and financial prosperity would have been impossible to him.

Shakespeare's rare abilities appear to have won early recognition in the literary world. As early as 1591 Edmund Spenser speaks of him as "our pleasant Willie,"

> "The man whom nature's self had made
> To mock herself, and truth to imitate."

He also designated him as

> "That same gentle spirit from whose pen
> Large streams of honey and sweet nectar flows."

Our great dramatist's reputation as actor, author, and man is also shown in a pamphlet entitled "Kind-heart's Dream," by a brother dramatist, named Henry Chettle, who, having slandered Shakespeare in editing a posthumous work by a notorious literary man, named Robert Greene, subsequently made him a very frank apology. After confessing his offense Chettle says: "I am sorry, because myself have seen his [Shakespeare's] demeanor no less civil than he is excellent in the quality he professes; besides, divers, [persons] of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty; and his facetious grace in writing, that approves his art."

There is no reason for doubting that this repenting adversary fairly interpreted public opinion concerning the poet. It is also certain that Queen Elizabeth had some of his plays performed at her court, though there is no evidence that he ever acted in her presence. After her death he was in favor with her successor, King James. That his influence was great among his fellow actors and repressive of the worst features of theatrical life is apparent in that he had no sooner ceased from acting in 1604 than the company introduced plays which displeased the court and offended the tastes of many private individuals. Evidently Shakespeare stood on a higher plane, intellectually and morally, than the men with whom he was associated.

Crowned with high literary reputation, and in possession of wealth sufficiently ample to gratify his not immoderate desires, Shakespeare spent the last four or five years of his life in honorable retirement at Stratford. He died on the 23rd of April, 1616, when only fifty-two years old. The disease which caused his death is unknown. His wife survived him over seven years. Of the three children born to them two daughters were living at the time of his death.

The fact that the only legacy to his wife mentioned in his will was their "second-best bed," taken in connection with the equally certain fact that he never took her to London during his twenty-five years' residence there, has often been cited as proof that the discord of their early life continued to the bitter end. Possibly it did. His living so much away from her certainly suggests that their marital affections were not very warm. Nevertheless, it does not prove the permanence of their discord, inasmuch as he is known to have paid at least an annual visit to Stratford, and to have made liberal provision for her needs during his absence. The apparent meanness of his legacy is explained by the fact that under English law her dowry was ample, since his *estate* was principally freehold property. As to the "second-

best bed," it has been thought that it was the one on which they had slept, the best bed being probably a spare one for company, and that its bequest was not a mark of ill-will, but of kindly feeling, if not of affection. There can be little doubt, however, that from the first they were not suited to each other, and that as his genius expanded they grew, intellectually at least, farther and farther apart, having less and less in common. Anne may have been proud of his fame, but pride is not love, nor can its gratifications satisfy the natural hunger of the human heart for affection. The poet most likely felt that his marriage to her was one of the great mistakes of his life; but, being of a peaceful, gentle temper, he probably resolved, like a prudent man, to make the best of his misfortune and to treat her kindly, although it was not possible for him to lavish upon her that measure of conjugal affection of which his great soul, had he been truly mated, was capable. His case stands as a grave protest against the folly of hasty, imprudent, ill-assorted marriages.

No Christian can study Shakespeare's works without profoundly regretting that his splendid genius, instead of being consecrated to religion, was laid as a sacrifice on that polluted altar, the theater. With what unequaled splendor would his thoughts have shone had his far-seeing intellect been illuminated by the presence of the indwelling God! What noble service he would have done for Christ had his great heart been filled with divine love! Never, perhaps, was mortal man better fitted by nature for such high service than Shakespeare! His native gentleness, if directed by divine charity, would have made him like John among the disciples. His amazing mental penetration, his keen moral perceptions, his power to make clear statements of truth, his wondrous energy and suggestiveness of expression, had they been pervaded, guided, sanctified, by the regenerating forces of the Holy Spirit, would have made him among the

Christian poets of all ages what Paul was among the founders of the Christian Church. Alas, that all these great endowments should have been used to adorn an institution which, from its origin until now, has been an instrument of social corruption!

But, it may be asked, must not Shakespeare be written among the benefactors of the human race, despite his unfortunate connection with the theater? Did he not strive to lift the drama out of the quagmire of moral corruption in which he found it? Has he not left the world a legacy of immortal thought conceived in the interests of virtue and religion?

These queries arise very naturally in the mind of the Christian who makes himself familiar with this remarkable man's life and writings. In many things he stands out in strangely inconsistent attitudes, and his dramas, being but the expression of his character, necessarily resemble him. They are marked by both badness and goodness. One is disposed to think him a religious man when reading such passages as the following, on man's responsibility for the right use of his gifts:

> "Heaven doth with us as we with torches do;
> Not light them for themselves: for if our virtues
> Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike
> As if we had them not. Spirits are not finely touched
> But to fine issues: nor nature never lends
> The smallest scruple of her excellence,
> But, like a thrifty goddess, she determines
> Herself the glory of a creditor,
> Both thanks and use;"

and this strong statement of the accountability of man to God:

> "In the corrupted currents of this world
> Offense's gilded hand may shove by justice;
> . . . but 'tis not so above:

> There is no shuffling, there the action lies
> In his true nature; and we ourselves compelled,
> Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
> To give in evidence; "

and this clear putting of the awful fact of universal guilt and need of mercy:

> " Consider this,—
> That in the course of justice, none of us
> Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
> And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
> The deeds of mercy; "

also, this bold assertion of the doctrine of the atonement:

> " Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once;
> And he that might the vantage best have took,
> Found out the remedy."

Besides these admirable lines there are "above five hundred passages in Shakespeare's works which are taken apparently from Scripture originals, being either verbally or substantially founded on questions from Holy Writ." After reading them and wondering what motives influenced their author to put them into dramas intended for performance before audiences largely, if not mostly, composed of rude, profane, vulgar, graceless men and women, such as were wont to crowd a theater—especially its "pits"—in his times, one is inclined to think, surely Shakespeare was a pious man seeking to regenerate a corrupt institution. But when one finds that many of these solemn and sublime passages are intermingled with gross vulgarities, profane words, impure allusions, the indecencies of tavern wits, and the adventures of dissipated men and lewd women, one sickens at the unnatural admixture. No truly religious man could have thus yoked the holy to the unholy. On the other hand, no

thoroughly bad man could have given such reverential expression to the sublimest truths of Holy Writ as one finds in the selections cited above. Gervinus, as quoted by Professor Shairp, claims that "the feelings and sentiments which rise most frequently to the lips of his purest characters may be fairly taken as his own." But why may not the same thing be claimed for the feelings and sentiments which rise to the lips of his impure characters? Coleridge, while admitting the presence of the impure in his plays, contends that he has "no virtuous vice, never renders that amiable which religion and reason teach us to detest, nor clothes impurity in the garb of virtue." He also claims that when contrasted with the plays of his age the superior morality of his dramas is unquestionable. Conceding all this, it yet cannot be denied that Shakespeare treats his vicious characters in such a facetious manner, that the reader is likely to be so pleased with their wit, humor, jollity, and good-natured abandon, as neither to look upon their vices with unqualified moral censure, nor to feel very profoundly the solemnity and point of the serious passages put into the mouths of his other characters.

The Christian moralist cannot, therefore, accord Shakespeare a place among the benefactors of mankind, nor discern in his character the impress of religious convictions. As to his being a reformer of the theater it is enough to say that, while his dramas gave it a loftier ideal than it had previously possessed, it was not reformed thereby. And at a later date, during the reign of Charles II., it became as vile as vice could make it. Neither can his plays be accepted as compositions written or fitted, in their aggregate influence, to promote the interests of religion and virtue. No doubt Shakespeare was a diligent reader of the Bible, that its sublime truths made a strong impression on his poetic nature, and that it sharpened his moral perceptions. But it is tolerably certain that it neither captured his will nor ruled his

life. Nevertheless, his artist's eye seeing how effective a background for his tragedies its majestic truths would make, he wrought them into his work with inimitable skill. They had their place—were necessary, indeed—in pictures of human life meant to be both idealistic and realistic. Hence

" What's good, what's bad, what helps, what hurts, he shows,"

and therefore we find in his dramas, as in the feet of Nebuchadnezzar's image, an admixture of iron and clay—the solidity of truth and virtue, and the frailty of error and vice.

And his dramas represent the man. He had moral light, but it shone on a background of spiritual darkness; he had religious sentiments which quickened his imagination and swelled his emotions, but did not regenerate his heart. Hence, in his actions "he was no stainless knight," yet he was, through caution or a will strong enough to rein his appetites and passions, or both, not given to excess in vices prevalent in the theatrical circle of which he was apparently the ruling spirit. In his business transactions he appears to have been honorable; in demeanor, gentle; in spirit, kind and conciliatory; in conversation, entertaining; in enterprise, vigorous and prudent; in his treatment of his family, liberal, but apparently not demonstratively affectionate; in intellect, a giant; in poetic genius, if not unequaled, yet never excelled; in religion, a formalist with predilections favoring, not Romanism or rigid ecclesiasticism, but puritanism. Taking him all in all, he was a mighty man, who, had he given the strength of his soul to the spiritual interests of mankind, would have contributed immensely toward the spread of the kingdom of God. But, notwithstanding his devotion to the earthly, such was the splendor of his genius, such the grandeur of his intellect, that Fame will continue to trumpet his name to the world until the end of time. Shakespeare won what he sought—the crown of immortality on earth.

CHARACTER OF SHAKESPEARE'S PRODUCTIONS.

Take away the dross from the silver, and there shall come forth a vessel for the finer.—SOLOMON.

Shakespeare's genius is unrivaled; but it is the earthly and the natural he paints. Of the heavenly and the supernatural—the spiritual, in the highest sense—he says little. Perhaps the man felt more than the poet reveals. Perhaps he deemed human life alone to be the proper subject for dramatic treatment. Still the fact remains. His characters are all *human*. For the divine we must turn to another book and to other teachers.—DOCTOR JOSEPH ANGUS.

Of all the attempts in modern literature to reproduce the manners and sentiments of the classical periods, Shakespeare's are by far the most successful. In the employment of classical imagery no poet has ever exhibited such mastery and grace.—PROFESSOR THOMAS B. SHAW.

All feel the beauty of Shakespeare's heroines, the variety, the naturalness, the perfection of his portraiture of women. They are in some sense the crowning glory of his finest dramas.—PROFESSOR JOHN CAMPBELL SHAIRP.

The great art of Shakespeare, as a portrayer of character and passion, seems to consist in his manner of making his personages, accidentally, involuntarily—nay, even in spite of themselves—express their own character and admit us, as it were, into the utmost recesses of their hearts.—SHAW.

Shakespeare was not only a great poet, but a great philosopher.—COLERIDGE.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

[SUBJECT-OUTLINE OF HALF THE MONTH.]

1. Birthyear? Birthday? Ancestors? Ben Jonson's lines? His father? Mother? Brothers and sisters? Childlife? Education? Traditions about his early occupations?
2. Marriage? Anne Hathaway? His reference to marriage? First child? Twins? Trouble? Departure from Stratford?
3. The Sir-stealing story? Life in London? Unlikely stories? Probability?
4. First original play? Last play? Date of each? Number of plays produced? How Coleridge and Dr. Quincey speak of Shakespeare?
5. General characters of play-scenes? Probable characters of Shakespeare? Personal success?
6. Edmund Spenser's allusions to him in 1591? Shakespeare and Henry (Lucrece)? Queen Elizabeth? King James?
7. Last years? Death? Age? Wife? Children? His last will?
8. Great faults of Shakespeare's works? What he might have been? How are his dramas like himself?

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